EZ STREET

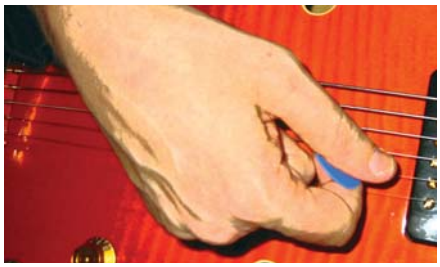
Get Rhythm

BY ANDY ELLIS

RHYTHM IS THE HEARTBEAT OF MUSIC. BUT unlike a heartbeat with its predictable pattern, musical rhythm is most exciting when its accents skip, jump, and shift within the context of a steady tempo. Understanding these shifts, and knowing when and how to incorporate them into your playing, is essential for any guitarist hoping to hold a listener's attention. With this lesson, we'll begin exploring the world of rhythm and discover ways to harness its energy and momentum.

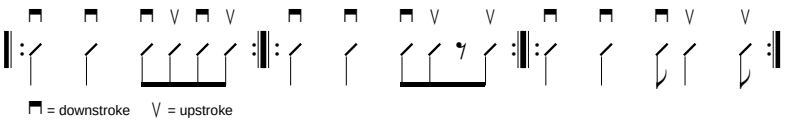
Our journey begins with one word: *syncopation*. A rhythm becomes syncopated when its accents fall on the upbeats. Many guitar styles, including jazz, R&B, bossa nova, blues, and funk are defined by syncopation.

Take a look at Ex. 1, which contains three rhythmic patterns. The first measure is very straightforward: Beats one and two are quarter-notes, and beats three and four are subdivided into eighth-notes. Mute the strings with your fretting hand, and strum them slowly, playing the *one, two, three-and, four-and* rhythm. Follow the picking indications (down, down, down-up, down-up), and repeat the four-beat phrase several times.

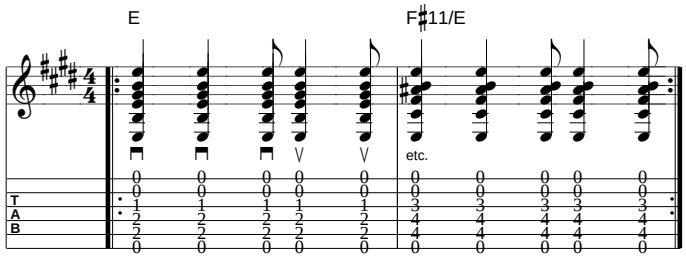


There are several ways to strum syncopated grooves. The classic, old-school, arched-wrist approach [left] lets you snap the strings using a subtle rotation that begins with your forearm and ends with the tip of your pick. Keep your wrist off the bridge, curl your fingers loosely into your hand, and support your forearm on the upper edge of the guitar. This technique's advantages include maximum acoustic volume and the ability to strike all strings virtually simultaneously. The more rock-oriented, side-of-palm-on-bridge strumming technique [right] trades reduced acoustic volume (which you can compensate for by turning up your amp) for superb bass-string muting control—essential for chunky rhythm textures. Here, your picking motion comes mainly from the wrist. To further enhance hand stability, leave your unused fingers relaxed, extended, and resting on the guitar.

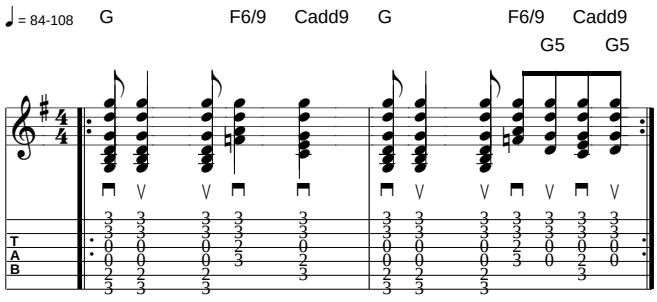
EX. 1



EX. 2



EX. 3



HUH?

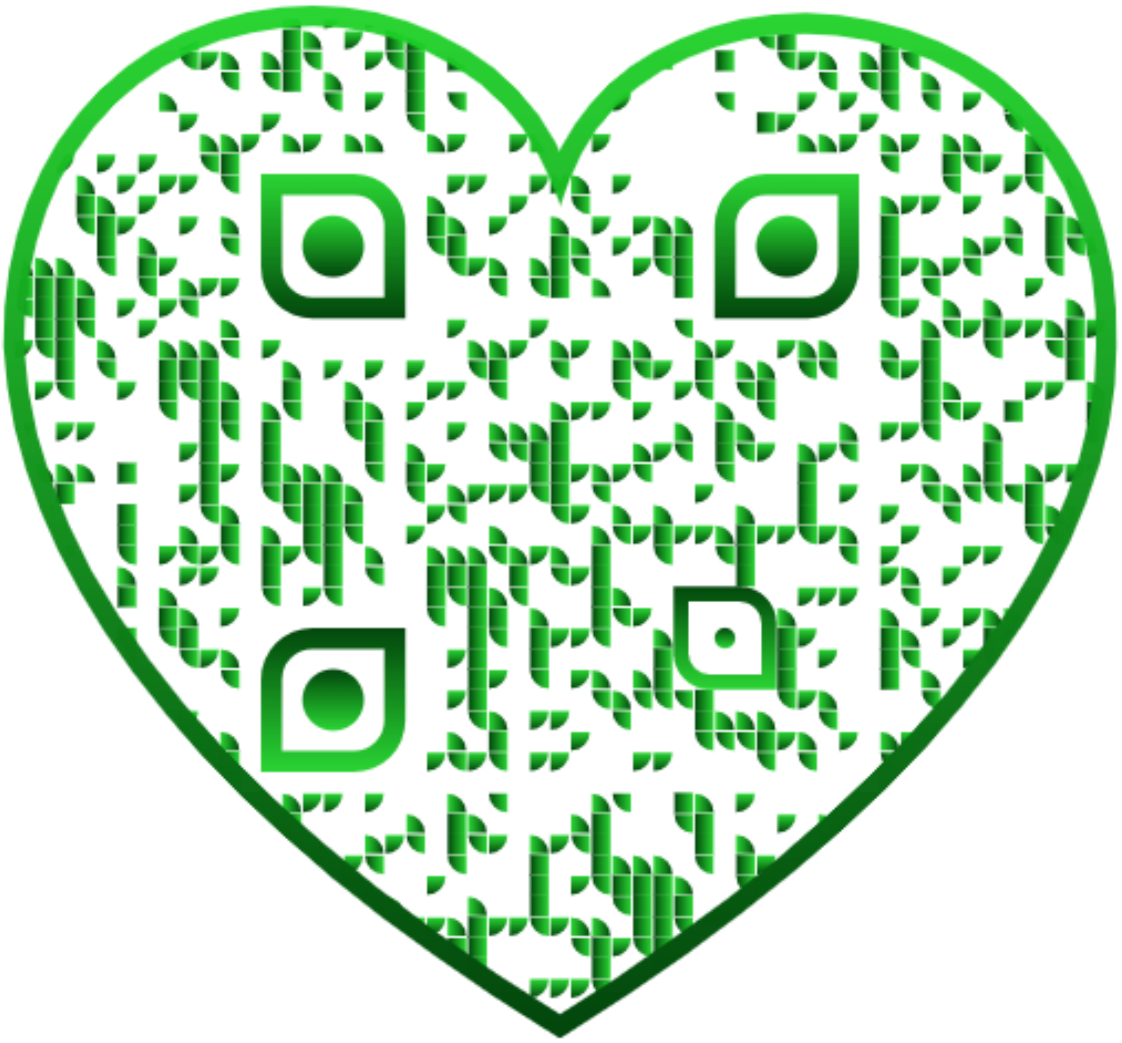
The speed of a piece's rhythm is indicated by its tempo. A tempo marking consists of two elements—the beat value (for example, quarter-note, eighth-note, or half-note), and the number of these beats per minute (abbreviated as bpm).

Next, play the second measure, in which you skip beat four's downbeat. Rather than stopping your strumming for the eighth-note rest, you may find it helpful to maintain the down-up, down-up hand motion, and simply dodge the strings on the skipped downbeat. Can you hear the rhythmic kick in the second half of this measure? Welcome to the world of syncopation.

The third measure in Ex. 1 shows one of the basic building blocks of syncopated rhythm. In terms of attacks and strumming pattern, it's identical to the second measure. But here's the difference: Instead of replacing beat four's downbeat with an eighth-note rest, we've expanded the previous eighth-note into a quarter-note. This maneuver yields extra sustain for any chord we hit on the *and* of beat three. This one-measure rhythmic figure appears time and again in syncopated beats, including many of the coolest Latin grooves.

Ex. 2 pairs our syncopated rhythm with some simple harmony. Don't wince at *F♯11/E* in bar 2. Despite its gnarly name, the voicing is easy: Simply slide bar 1's *E* grip up a whole-step (two frets) and let the open sixth, second, and first strings ring along with the fretted notes.

In Ex. 3, we flip our new rhythm around, putting the syncopation at the front of the measure. And for variety, we'll also subdivide beats three and four in bar 2, splitting the quarter-notes into eighths. Play this two-bar groove over and over until both the rhythm and chord grips feel totally natural.

Next time: Hey, Bo Diddley!

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